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ABSTRACT

An instructor teaching professional writing found that groups collaborating on the final project required for the course, the creation of a brochure, experienced considerable infighting and tension. In reexamining his course objectives, he confirmed his sense that indeed collaboration in one form or another is inevitable in American professional life today: workshopping, coauthoring, knowledge making. Patient diagnosis, private or corporate law, project management--all are becoming more collaborative, if they were not inherently so before. So how does the instructor help students work through the difficulties of consensus building? Greg Myers suggests that "consensus cannot be known without its opposite"--dissensus. A revision of the course objectives yielded the following: (1) to give students the opportunity to collaborate with one another on a major project; (2) to allow them the flexibility to find a model that works for their group; (3) to celebrate dissensus by allowing it to occur and by preparing students for handling it. Dissensus is then encouraged in several ways: through nongraded practice with small-group collaboration early in the semester; through instruction and practice in identifying group dynamics and roles. Giving students a framework of the roles people fall into in groups, such as the "encouragers," the "feeling expressers," the "compromisers," and the "gatekeepers," helps them work through difficulties later. K. Houp and T. Pearsall's "Reporting Technical Information" offers a good framework for helping the group accomplish the set task. (TB)

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Celebrating Dissensus in Collaboration: A Professional Writing Perspective

by

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Four years ago this semester I was a new assistant professor. Having just completed my dissertation four months earlier, I was thrust into a small English department of normally eight members, but at the time down to five, including myself. I was "it" for the five-year-old, struggling professional writing track in the English major. Wide-eyed, naive, in the middle of a nation-wide search for two new colleagues, struggling with a 4-4 teaching load of all new courses, and trying to work my way through the professional writing program to see what it was about, I reached out to the only other person in my department who was remotely associated with professional writing--John--an American literature professor who had started teaching introduction to professional writing several years earlier. I was in line to teach one section of it just to find out what it was all about first hand. Since I wanted to experience pretty much what all the majors had been dealing with and the training they had before they showed up in my 200- and 300-level professional writing classes, I spent a lot of time talking with John about what he did in class. I decided to use the skeleton of his syllabus with minor changes and accepted with glee the end of term collaborative project--a brochure.

I did so because I had classroom success with collaborative learning concepts in peer evaluation groups, reading groups, and discussion groups, but I'd never had students write and work together to create a single document. I myself had collaborated--and still do--successfully, and ultimately underneath I was saying how wonderful it would be to have fewer projects to grade at the semester's end. So I blithely went into the semester preparing the students by using peer group evaluations of drafts. Once they got to the final project, I allowed them to choose groups to work in to create a brochure, a real one, not just some classroom exercise. After the students had worked about three weeks on the project, they presented the final version to the class for explanation of their process and for "public critique" of their brochure.

Specifically their assignment was to write a two-sided, 8½ x 11-inch, four-panel or six-panel brochure for some group on or off campus that needed print advertising using visual and verbal materials. Group members were to divide the work as they saw fit, but--and this is a big but--they all had to take some active part in the writing process, and they *all* had to eventually *agree* to what was being put forth. But to be honest, I really didn't stress agreement very much. The grade was an average of the grade for the final brochure, that of their oral presentation, and one for their individual contribution to the process of "group work."

In a class of sixteen students, I had four groups of four. The first week went smoothly with all groups identifying a client in need and dividing up the work rather quickly. The second week I did not meet class formally in order to give them time to work on the project on their own and to give me time to meet with the groups individually and extensively to assess their progress and to troubleshoot if necessary. This is when Group 3--Melissa, Stephanie, Lisa, and Rachel--began to have trouble making meetings with me and meetings with each other. Instead, I met with splinters of the group, seeing them all, telling them they would have to make time to all meet together, if not with me. In the third week, Stephanie and Lisa came to me saying they were going to have trouble completing the brochure on time because of these difficulties, and because Melissa wasn't doing what she'd agreed to do in the beginning. Shortly thereafter, Melissa came to my office complaining that the rest of the group wasn't cooperating with her by meeting at times she could come, and she was afraid that would affect part of her grade. Essentially, I told them they had to work it out, that how well they worked together was part of the grade, that if they were on the job and couldn't work together, they might suffer for it. This was a class in *professional* writing, and they were going to have to resolve the problem like professionals, without running to the supervisor telling tales. I told them that if they couldn't

resolve the issues amicably, it would definitely affect that part of their individual/group grade; however, they would have input into the grades at the end when they would anonymously evaluate the other members of their group. Little did I know how much worse I could make matters by trying to pour the oil of professionalism over troubled waters.

The day of presentations came with the three united members meeting me at the door of the classroom saying, "Melissa isn't here now, and she was supposed to bring the visual aid and all the figures for the research to a meeting last night. We can't go first." So I let them drop back in the lineup for presentations until last, hoping that Melissa would show. But I told them they'd have to present--this was the last day of class--no more options--and a low grade was better than a zero. So this matter that had started out affecting perhaps individual group grades was now going to affect everyone's presentation grade. Fortunately for everyone, Melissa breezed in five minutes late with everything in hand. However, when Group 3's turn came last, she took over the presentation and did all the talking, effectively shutting *out* and *down* all the other group members from contributing to the presentation. Her description of how they divided the work was distorted at best--given the individual and anonymous critiques later--but then I'm sure the revenge factor was at work on both sides. The brochure was above average and presentable with minor revision to the client, but at what cost to the students and to me?

What happened in the other three groups fit into prototypical models of successful group work. From their conferences with me and their anonymous evaluations of each other I learned they adopted a range of techniques to accomplish the task. Group 1 wrote literally together in longhand or at the computer, each person contributing to generating text, critiquing text, and revising text. Group 2 divided up the sections of the brochure for each person to write an equal portion. Then they brought those sections together and revised in a group to bring the divergent

voices together. Group 4 divided up the writing process: two persons researched, interviewed, and prewrote (notes, outlines, headings). The third person drafted, and the fourth person revised and edited with approval from all members of the group.

Since I had a seventy-five percent success rate in my first attempt at requiring students to collaborate, I decided to keep at it, flying by the seat of my pants because I had found little practical, hands-on, classroom material on collaboration, especially in professional writing classes. In fact, in December before my fateful venture James Reither and Douglas Vipond were noting in *College English* that for all the explosion of discussion then and in prior years about socially constructed knowledge and the social nature of writing, there was little about practical applications of these theories. They said, "Because the term *social* implicates too little by way of concrete activity, the generally theoretical discussion of literature has not helped us see ways to overhaul our thinking about writing in practice or of teaching writing in practice" (856). They categorized three types of collaboration: workshopping, coauthoring, and knowledge making, the first two of which I believe were occurring in my classes.

In looking back and trying to improve my teaching I tried collaborative projects four more times in introduction to professional writing, managerial communication, and technical writing. Sometimes collaborative assignments were optional, sometimes required, but most of the time when it was required there were problems similar to, but not as extreme as, those described earlier, and in about the same twenty-five percent of the class. So when I read John Trimbur's work for my own collaborative projects, his rhetoric of dissensus jumped out at me. Was dissensus occurring with my problem groups? Was it useful in collaboration? How about in professional life? I began informally to examine and question professionals I know who write: engineers, attorneys, physicians, nurses, etc. They all told me what I'd learned by

watching our culture--collaborating in one form or another is inevitable in American professional life today: workshopping, coauthoring, knowledge making. Patient diagnosis, private or corporate law, project management--all are becoming more collaborative, if they weren't inherently so before. Another issue at hand was whether the sense of consensus being the end of all the "real-world" collaboration is real or false (Trimbur 610; Bruffee). Whatever is true (perhaps both views are), this anecdotal evidence convinced me I was obligated in professional writing classes to teach students the skills they would need both to communicate and to learn how organizations often expect people to work together toward a common goal. Clearly I didn't want my students to think that professional writing was the romantic notion of the individual working in isolation to create--essentially that "No one is an island entire of itself."

Greg Myers agrees that consensus must be seen in terms of differences and not just of agreements, "as the result of conflicts, not as a monolith" (166). John Trimbur says, "consensus cannot be known without its opposite"--dissensus--or "the resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation, what Roland Barthes calls acratic discourse--the discourse out of power." He argues that "it offers a way to analyze the strategic moves by which discourse communities legitimize their own conversation by marginalizing others" (608-9). Further, Johanna Atwood has written that she wants to discourage this "philosophy of competition" by not adding competition to conflict. I would argue that while she wants to make collaboration in classrooms more dialogic and less hierarchical as Lunsford and Ede have outlined, in professional writing I would be doing my students a real disservice by not showing them what professional life is like before I send them out to work in it with only one way of collaborating--a *subversive* one from many professional perspectives, even Lunsford's and Ede's.

Carrie Shively Leverenz, in her recent "Peer Response in the Multi-Cultural Classroom"

critiques John Trimbur's and Greg Myers' position:

> While both Myers and Trimbur note ways in which institutionalized groups work to normalize themselves, they hold out hope that student groups within progressive classrooms can somehow escape from...this normalizing function. Unfortunately, they can give only theoretical answers to questions regarding how collaboration might play itself out in concrete classroom settings. Important as their work has been, it has not told us what really happens when groups of students work together in writing classes that explicitly value difference. (168)

Do I value difference in the classroom or do I try to force consensus? First, let's look at how the prevailing theories of collaboration showed up in my first class, and then explore what I do now in the classroom.

First is the well-documented debate between Kenneth Bruffee and John Trimbur--consensus versus dissensus. Groups 1, 2, and 4 all achieved consensus as Bruffee describes in several articles. Group 3 certainly achieved dissensus but not the idealized version of Trimbur. Rather, what Trimbur says he's *not* advocating is what happened in this group: "struggle becoming a matter of interrupting the conversation to replace consensual validation with force" (609). Melissa wasn't being validated by the rest of the group, so she interrupted the conversation and took control by force by withholding information and by playing politics.

Second, Group 3 also exhibited some of the characteristics of what Lunsford and Ede call the hierarchical model, which they define as "linearly structured, driven by highly specific goals, and carried out by people who play clearly assigned roles. Goals are most often designated by someone outside of hierarchically superior to the group" (235). Multiple voices and shifting authority are seen as problems to overcome; knowledge is seen as information to be found or a

problem to be solved. They call this model conservative and masculine.

Third, the group that truly coauthored the brochure (Ronni, Mark, Sarah, and Tracy, with Sarah as the clear leader), most closely exhibited Lunsford and Ede's dialogic or feminine model. Dialogic collaboration they define as "loosely structured" with "fluid" roles; one person may take on multiple roles and/or shift from one to another role throughout the project; the process is as important as the goals and those involved (235-6) The group members value creative tension inherent in multivoiced writing. Groups 2 and 4, the ones that divided up the process or the content, exhibited the hierarchical model in its most ideal form--genuine give and take--effective problem solving without marginalized voices being silenced.

Goals for Success with Collaborative Projects

After examining the debates about the double-edged sword of consensus/dissensus, I developed these goals for my collaborative assignments:

1. I want students to experience an awareness that collaboration is a reality for most professional applications such as engineering, business, law. They won't always be working in isolation, and they may experience several different modes of collaboration.
2. I want students to have the flexibility to find a model that works for their group and with that flexibilty I allow them freedom to chose either group members or project.
3. I want to celebrate dissensus with the other models by allowing it to occur, but preparing the students for its eventuality and giving them ways to deal with it so they don't get into that power-play situation with group 3; however, realistic and uncomfortable it may be, it would be unfair of me to knowlingly set them up as an experiement to see what might happen without giving them some tools to handle the consequences.

Methods for Achieving Goals

1. Students complete real projects for real clients but with me as an intermediary supervisor.
2. I either solicit projects from clients, and students choose projects; or students choose groups, and I assign projects.
3. I encourage dissensus in several ways:
   - with classroom, nongraded practice with small writing collaborations first.
   - with instruction and practice in identifying group dynamics and roles. I give them this framework of what roles group members can play so they are able to identify their own behaviors and that of others *and* so they have descriptions of behaviors to inform their negotiations with each other. I hope to help them to understand what's going on while they are socially negotiating and constructing their writing.

     The framework I use is Houp and Pearsall's from *Reporting Technical Information:* **Task Roles** help the group accomplish the set task. Initiators, Information Seekers/Givers, Opinion Seekers/Givers, Clarifiers, Elaborators, Summarizers. These labels are self-explanatory. **Group Maintenance Roles** help maintain a supportive group climate to allow disagreement in a safe place. Encouragers respond warmly to contributions. Feeling Expressers sound out the group for its feelings harmonizers-mediate conflict. Compromisers withdraw to maintain group harmony. Gatekeepers work to swing discussion from forceful members to quiet ones so they contribute (36-47).
   - I ask students to analyze their in-class collaboration *process* in terms of their group dynamics, and we discuss potential strengths and weaknesses as group

members and how they might improve in the major project.

Ultimately I want to give students both a realization of the different ways of " how it is" in collaborating in the real world and possibilities of how they might contribute to changing "how it is" by taking with them into this world, new, equally productive models of collaboration--dialogism and dissensus--when they enter the work force. I hope to encourage a dissensus among all these complementary modes of collaboration.

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